

CONFERENCE REPORT
Three Caribbean Conferences
in Jamaica and Haiti, 2016

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The Caribbean region regularly engenders and hosts intellectually stimulating educational and cultural events. In a visit this year to Jamaica, my country of origin, I experienced three of these events in June and July. It struck me that each had a richly postcolonial element of challenging negative legacies of colonialism, which have often solidified into current norms such as insufficiently tackling intellectual exclusion, neglecting material local problems, and downplaying or ignoring local achievement and culture. I reflect below on how the conferences contributed to countering such problems and establishing creative practices in intellectual culture.

1. The Calabash Literary Festival, Jamaica:
3 -5 June 2016

I went with friends to “Calabash”, a biennial Jamaican event becoming famous as one of the best literary festivals in the world (see <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jun/04/calabash-literary-festival-marlon-james-jamaica>).

‘Calabash’ is held on the sloping shores of Treasure Beach, a Jamaican seaside village about three hours drive from Kingston, the capital. Over a thousand people came to the festival – mainly Jamaicans, but also a good number of overseas visitors. We listened to readings and discussions from cutting-edge novelists, essayists and poets from many countries. It was a feast of magnificent, avant-garde literature. Marlon James, this year’s Booker prize winner, talked about and read from his prizewinning novel, *A Brief History of Seven Killings*. ‘Calabash’ is a special event for Jamaican-born Marlon, for it was at one of these festivals that he got the break that led to the publication

of his first novel, *John Crow's Devil*. This is how one magazine describes a selection of the literary offerings:

This year's festival's theme was '*fruu-ish-aan*' (fruition), and featured three days of free outdoor readings, discussions, and performances. The line-up was a mix of international authors, like Man Booker-winner Eleanor Catton from New Zealand and British travel writer Geoff Dyer, award-winning writers Chigozie Obioma and Teju Cole from Nigeria, and local favorites poet Kei Miller and Man Booker-winner Marlon James, whose novel *A Brief History of Seven Killings* won the 2015 Man Booker Prize for Fiction. Listening to British writer Decca Aikenhead's account of her husband's tragic drowning at Treasure Beach two years prior, the audience gasped—and cried. Amidst Jamaican poet Kei Miller's stirring reading, the audience cheered and jumped to their feet in support. <http://www.cntraveler.com/stories/2016-06-09/why-literatures-biggest-names-are-going-to-jamaica>

I experienced two important differences between Calabash and other literary festivals that I have attended. One is that all the sessions are free of charge. "In keeping with the town's anything-goes vibe, Calabash is free and open to the public. At each event, as many as 3,000 people ranging from local fishermen to New York literati gather at Jake's, on a lawn by the sea, to listen and learn" (New York Times T Magazine, May 2014). The organisers of the event (the Calabash International Literary Festival Trust) solicit sponsorship to finance it, thus making it possible for Jamaicans from all walks of life to immerse themselves in excellent modern literature from the pens of an array of iconic local and global writers. When Marlon James talked about his prize-winning novel at the Writer's Festival in Brisbane, Australia, in May of this year, I had to buy an expensive ticket that allowed me to hear him. In Jamaica a month later, I heard him again in a session given to the audience at no cost to them.

Atmosphere of Celebration

The second difference is Calabash's atmosphere of celebration. Sessions at literary festivals are usually held indoors in air-conditioned, artificially lit lecture theatres or libraries. Audiences and presenters quietly interact in the manner of a

university seminar. Calabash is held mainly outdoors. Most of the audience was shaded under huge festival marquees, looking out at beautiful views of the Caribbean sea, while smaller groups met in Jakes Hotel nearby for workshops and talks with authors. Besides the literary sessions, there was food flowing, craft stalls, live music in-between readings as well as backdrop to some of them, dancing, and strolls on the beach. As the organisers put it: 'Passion is the only price of entry. But voluntary contributions are welcome!' (<http://www.calabashfestival.org/2016/info.html>)

So, at the Calabash festival, held on the shores of Calabash Bay, Jamaica, a postcolonial ethos was evident. The literature took a postcolonial approach of deep exploration of our societies and their culture. The fluid, celebratory structure of the conference challenged the norm of exclusive intellectualising in these literary events. And the organisation of the conference, in making entry free, challenged the norm of excluding all but the well-heeled. The next Calabash festival will be in 2018 – as always, in Calabash Bay, Treasure Beach, Jamaica.

2. The 41st Annual Conference of the Caribbean Studies Association (CSA), Haiti : 6-11 June 2016

Within a few days of Calabash I embarked on my next trip, to Haiti, Jamaica's nearest island neighbour. Haiti's capital, Port-au-Prince, was hosting some 800 scholars and artists for the week-long conference of the Caribbean Studies Association (CSA). I had been invited to give a plenary paper and run an education workshop at the CSA, whose theme this year was **Caribbean Global Movements: People, Ideas, Arts, Culture and Economic Sustainability**. This is an eclectic conference featuring intellectual history, literature, the arts and the social sciences. You can see an outline of some of its 2016 panel themes here: <http://www.aaihs.org/intellectual-history-panels-at-the-caribbean-studies-associations-41st-annual-conference/>.

This year, the 2015-2016 CSA President, Professor Carol Boyce Davies of Cornell University, introduced several innovations into the structure of the conference. These included

- Daily plenary sessions on sub themes of the conference open to the community

- Free attendance for university students, teachers and local committee members
- An extra Saturday added to the conference to do an all-day educational impact day with student teachers and working teachers
- An art exhibition – “Haitopia”
- A Wearable Art Expo to give local artisans and artists a chance to show and market their products
- The use of local transportation (TAP-TAP) as the official transportation of the conference
- A Community Service project which took backpacks with supplies to a local school in Deleard in the outskirts of Port au Prince

(see Carole Boyce Davies, ‘CSA-HAITI 2016, A new model for Caribbean Studies Association Conferences’, in the *2016 Newsletter of the Australian Association for Caribbean Studies, AACS*).

One of the innovations was that Professor Boyce Davies had applied for and won a Kellogg grant that funded a full ‘Education Policy Day’ during the conference. This day, Saturday 11 June, was attended by 288 Haitian schoolteachers from all over the island. I congratulate Professors Carole Boyce-Davies, Linda Spears Bunton and their team for coordinating this excellent day for local teachers. The theme of the day was: “Education for Economic Sustainability and Social Transcendence”. I gave one of the three plenary talks held in the morning of Education Day, discussing Cuba’s approach to educational change, and its implications for sustainable change in Caribbean societies, a topic which I have long been studying.

In the afternoon, the invited speakers ran workshops for the schoolteacher participants on themes including systemic educational change, art and culture in the teaching of history, education, the environment and economic sustainability, and competency-based education programs.

In my workshop I organised the teachers in groups and asked them to discuss and report to each other on what changes they would like to see in the Haitian education system. They were passionate about the changes they wanted to take place. Foremost among these was a change in the language of instruction. They argued that this needed to be Haitian Creole, rather than French. One teacher remarked that “It is impossible to express powerful ideas unless you express them in Creole”, and this drew many other remarks in wide agreement.

Several teachers expressed the view that the high failure rate among Haitian school students was caused mainly by the insistence of the school system on teaching in French rather than Creole. One of the groups in their report said that they hoped their discussions would be the start of a National Dialogue for Educational Change. Had there been time, I would like to have discussed much more with the teachers about educational change in other Caribbean countries, as well as in Australia, all of which would have added to the mix of ideas.

The talk by Angela Davis, as featured keynote speaker at the conference, was a highlight for me. Angela Davis has been an important figure in my own intellectual development, not only for her passionate defence of social justice but also for her cultural example. Her defiant Afro hairstyle in the 1970s helped persuade me to stop straightening my hair and wear my own curly, frizzy Afro with pride.

While I knew of her activist role in the USA in fighting, and teaching, and writing to combat racial, economic and gender inequalities, I learnt from her speech at this CSA conference that she had done her degrees in French studies, that she loved French Caribbean literature, and that her work as a radical intellectual had been influenced by the Caribbean. “My first arrest was in the Caribbean” she said to the CSA audience, “and my first understanding of the power of international solidarity was in the Caribbean”. This is a summary, from my notes on Angela’s talk, of the story that she went on to tell about her adventures in the Caribbean in the 1970s: “I had been in Cuba for a few months, cutting sugar cane as a contribution to their goal of meeting targets. I travelled on a Cuban ship, with a group of friends, to Guadeloupe to deliver cement to a community there. We also had lots of literature for the activist

anti-colonial movement there. The French authorities checked us and seized the literature on grounds that we had subversive intentions to turn the Guadeloupe people towards Communism. They seized our passports, and put me in custody. It was the work of a woman activist from Guadeloupe that got me out of there – she looked up the laws and statutes and found that it was unlawful for them to detain me on those grounds. That was when I realized the depth and power of international solidarity. This sustained me in a long 18 month prison sentence in the USA.”

In her talk, Angela mentioned the struggle against Donald Trump. “It’s not that I fear him”, she said. “What I fear is the depth of white racism that he has shown up. Freedom needs a constant struggle to dismantle oppression, which for many can seem to be the natural order of things...”

I enjoyed two days of sightseeing after the conference. On Sunday 12 June I visited the interesting National Museum of Haiti (*Musée National d’Haïti*) and the art and craft markets in Port-au-Prince. For a glimpse of the beautiful, complex and unique art traditions of Haiti, see Candice Russell’s *Masterpieces of Haitian Art* (<https://www.amazon.com/Masterpieces-Haitian-Art-Candice-Russell/dp/0764344269>).

On Monday I joined a group on an expedition to the Citadel and Sans Souci Palace. A trip to these places, half an hour’s air journey north of the capital, is a poignant reminder of the extraordinary and globally significant achievements of Haitian history – which appear to be unknown by many in the white-majority world (see Lillian Guerra in *Why Caribbean History Matters* (<https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/march-2014/why-caribbean-history-matters>)).

A small plane flew us to Cap Haitien, and from there we were driven through mountain roads to reach the path to the Citadel. Horses were waiting for us, and with trepidation and assistance, we got mounted. On horseback for the first time, we rode the steep seven-mile trail up the mountainside. At the summit (3,000 ft or 910 m) was The Citadel, built by up to 20,000 workers. This is a massive stone fortress with wide views of the valleys and bays below. Further grandeur lay in the

remains of the Sans Souci palace. Both were built in the early 19th century under the command of Henri Christophe, following the success of the Haitian Revolution in which enslaved Africans repelled the armies of Napoleon and won their freedom from France. An excellent guide told us many details of the story regarding how the fortress and palace were built, and the context of the first successful anti-slavery revolution of Africans in the 'New' World.

All of this was a memorable climax to an eventful CSA conference – one which embodied postcolonial directions in its inclusive outreach to Haitian society, its contribution to the local economy, and its papers and keynote speeches painting strategies to challenge the problems of neo-colonialism in the Caribbean.

See: [http://www.caribbeanstudiesassociation.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/CSA Newsletter July 2016.pdf](http://www.caribbeanstudiesassociation.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/CSA_Newsletter_July_2016.pdf)

The next CSA conference is in Nassau, The Bahamas, June 5th - 10th, 2017. Conference Theme: "Culture and Knowledge Economies: The Future of Caribbean Development?"

Full archive of CSA Newsletters:

<http://www.caribbeanstudiesassociation.org/e-newsletter-archive/>

3. Geography Anniversary Conference celebrating 50 years of the Geography Department at the University of the West Indies (UWI): 27 June – 1 July 2016.

This conference in Jamaica celebrated 50 years of undergraduate and postgraduate degree studies in the discipline of geography at the University of the West Indies (UWI). It featured a series of presentations from geographers who had taught or studied geography there. The conference panels were organised around the following themes: "Geography – Retrospect and Prospect; Geography in Practice; Current Research in Geography; Education – Geography for the 21st Century; and War Stories and Other Geographical Tales". These themes engendered many papers expressing the passionate interest of geography graduates in the environmental, educational and socio-political problems, policies and achievements of Caribbean societies. Geography graduates have become urban and environmental

planners, teachers, lecturers and ecological managers of various sorts, and are working in these and other valuable professional areas all over the Caribbean.

The conference included two field trips. One was a three-hour boat ride around Kingston Harbour. The boat departed from Newport East, went past Port Royal, rounded the tip of the Palisadoes and approached Lime Cay before returning to Kingston via the eastern end of the harbour and the Newport West container terminal. The trip was delightful not only because Kingston Harbour is beautiful, with a backdrop of mountains sloping down to brilliantly blue seas, but also because former Geography Department professor, Dr. Eleanor Jones, gave the conference participants an explanatory commentary as we sailed past these points of interest. Another field trip was a day's journey to Ocho Rios through along the new Chinese-built North/South highway, and back to Kingston over the old Mount Diablo road. A highlight of this excursion was a visit to Seville Great House and Heritage Park, site of the early Spanish settlement (16th to 17th centuries) in Jamaica.

A highlight of the conference was the presentation dinner organised at a Kingston hotel by the Jamaican Geographical Society (JGS). This is still a flourishing society that continues to carry out the decolonising work of linking UWI's Geography Department with people in the wider society. Officers of the JGS had prepared plaques commemorating the inspiring contributions of former academic geographers to the development of Geography as a discipline at UWI, and as an enjoyable field of study and general knowledge through the geographical society.